

How I Started Calling

By Tim Marriner

In 1970, in a small neighborhood of Norfolk, VA, neighbors introduced my parents to square dancing. They were among four other couples that traveled together to dance events around the region. My parents were already active campers so joining the affiliated camper square dance club was inevitable. At least once a month we traveled to various campgrounds where they could enjoy both camping and square dancing while I enjoyed the amenities; pools, mini golf, game rooms, and access to other kids my age. Several friends became active in clogging while others formed a teenage square dance club nearby. Not being sold on square dancing, I continued to meet up with them once a month during the camp and dance weekends.

Often I would venture into the dance hall to watch the square dance workshops, learn a line dance or two, or try out a few new clogging steps. On one occasion I followed laughter to the square dance hall where I observed a true entertainer at work; Dick Jones from New York. He placed pieces of a Styrofoam cup in his mouth to form teeth, put on a Mexican sombrero, and sang like a canary. He had the dancers laughing and cheering for more! Not having a shy bone in my body yet at that age, I walked up to him during the next break, shook his hand, and asked him what he was doing with a dual turntable at a square dance. He took the time to explain he was merely testing out some new equipment for somebody and showed me how it worked. The rest of the weekend I remained nearby observing his every move. At one point some folks even pulled me up on the dance floor to fill in a set that was in the need of one more person. I really was not sold on the dance but the caller sure had an interesting job.

Upon the insistency of my parents, I was dragged to my first square dance lesson in 1973 only to find someone else my age was to be my partner. Yes; it was a set up. To my astonishment it really was a lot of fun, but I was reluctant to let it show. Before I knew it, a bond formed between all the class members. We were going to get through learning these dance steps together one way or another. Several of our new dancer group even attended the weekly club dance, and were encouraged to try as much as we wanted in our own square towards the back of the room. Many club dancers ventured back to help. No matter how bad we did, we were laughing and having lots of fun.

Half way through the beginner lessons the host club sponsored an open microphone amateur night. The new dancer group dared me to give it a try. The club caller provided me with a singing call that I practiced for hours on end for several weeks. After achieving success with my first singer I was hooked. I couldn't wait to learn and try out new singing calls. Area callers allowed me to do guest spots at their clubs whenever I visited. One evening the caller for the teen group told me he would not allow me to call any more at his club until I learned how to call patter. The club caller for our group, Charlie Progrossi, offered his time to mentor me as long as it took. With his guidance, I learned how to work patter, perform dance parties, and assist with teaching. The area callers association also took me under their wing and provided me with many hours of microphone time. They brought in many well known educators to offer assistance; Cal Golden, Jim Mayo, and Bill Peters to name a few. Other new callers, like myself, came and went. The difference between these other new callers and me was the continued support from my mentor. He worked with me until he was transferred from the area.

Clubs started utilizing my services for demos, dance parties, teaching, and an occasional club dance when their caller was absent. Other callers started inviting me to share special events. One group in need of a caller hired me to teach their next class. This later became my first full time job as a club caller at the age of 15.

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